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Charles Bartlett

Irony in Democratic slaps at George Bush

It is ironic to hear Democrats say George Bush is too political to head the CIA after their abusive use of the agency as a political punching bag.

President Ford's abrupt decision to bring Bush back from China, where he is ably performing an important job, was wholly hinged to an urgent need to rebuild the nation's intelligence capacity from the risky tatters in which congressional investigators have left it. If it were not for these probes, the present director, an able professional, would have more than sufficed.

The CIA, after 28 years of operating in isolation, needed outside scrutiny, but the Senate and House inquiries have utilized the Watergate atmosphere and the candor of the director, William Colby, to stage running horror shows. Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, has amassed a staff of 120 people working to point public attention at mistakes which were fully corrected two years ago.

Meanwhile, the public's view of the CIA has been so soured that those senators and representatives regularly briefed through the years on CIA activities feel disinclined to speak up. Barry Goldwater is almost alone in attempting to keep the agency's work in perspective.

The political tenor of these inquiries is illustrated by the Senate committee's probe into the assassination plots. Church leapt on the issue after Nelson Rockefeller reported that his commission had lacked time to explore it fully. Avowing "We won't duck it" and describing the CIA as "a rogue elephant," Church set off to prove that some bad little fellows conspired on their own to kill off foreign leaders.

He promised a full report by Aug. 1, but it is nowhere in sight because Church's researchers found that the little fellows' conspiracies were sanctioned by Democratic and Republican presidents. Goldwater is accurate in saying that the Church committee is "locked in a tug-of-war between those who want to tell the truth and those who want to protect the Kennedys." The Democrats are maneuvering to use their dominance to focus the disclosures on Nixon plots against Chile's Salvador Allende.

Church and Rep. Otis Pike, D-N.Y., are catering to purists who insist that the cleansing effect of disclosure justifies a national humiliation. But the disclosures and leaks are eating away the good along with the bad. They have chewed up Colby's career. They have dried up intelligence

sources, exploded some sensitive situations, and caused foreign governments, private companies and even U.S. agencies to shrink from collaboration with American intelligence.

No intelligence professional can manage the huge repair job so long as bitter political winds are blowing. The hostile climate may make the repair job impossible for any director. But Democrats who oppose Bush can combine to block the best chance to get a fast, effective start on a crucial task.

Bush has made no political race for five years. The respect and affection he kindled in Congress have lifted him into a series of demanding tasks. The grace and character with which he presided over the Republican National Committee through the agonies of Watergate cannot be counted a liability in facing the shambles left by the Church-Pike probes. Bush's readiness to take on the task is a certain assurance that he does not have in mind any imminent bid for elective office.

Instead of indulging in further showmanship, the CIA probers should seize upon the Bush nomination as a chance to build character and good sense into a revived intelligence system. It is time to put aside the punching bag.